Open Communication

The Vision

Partners hold regularly scheduled meetings, in addition to day-to-day communication. Partners share all information relevant to the collaboration without hesitation and are candid and honest in their communication with each other. Partners have defined topics they consider confidential and have developed a strategy to share appropriate confidential information.

Open Communication

*The greatest problem of
communication is the illusion
that it has been accomplished.*

—George Bernard Shaw

Action Steps to Success

Successful partnerships cannot function without open communication. Ongoing communication among partners enhances teamwork. Open communication that addresses problems and conflicts also builds (or helps reestablish) trust. Strategies to establish and maintain open communication include:

Step 1

Define Basic Terms, Acronyms, and Jargon.

Using jargon, technical terms, or acronyms and assuming that all team members understand these terms can alienate important partners. Be certain to outline special terms or language in a non-condescending way for the whole group.

Step 2

Create a Norm That Encourages Ongoing Communication.

An environment in which partners are encouraged to continually communicate with each other and where conflict resolution mechanisms are in place fosters information sharing and teamwork. Make certain to establish and adhere to regularly scheduled meetings among partners, but also implement ongoing informal communication. Let partners know that their opinions are valued and that they can articulate opinions, both positive and negative, without repercussion. Make use of technology to share information (e.g., fax, electronic bulletin boards, e-mail, networked data, and online discussion groups). Solicit feedback on collaboration work products.

Step 3

Practice Sound Communication Skills.

Make certain that communication among partners involves listening, as well as speaking. Some effective listening strategies include:

- Try first to understand and second to be understood.

- Avoid prejudging—keep an open mind.

- Maintain eye contact.

- Be aware of the messages you are sending and those being sent with body language, as nonverbal communication can be even more powerful than the spoken word.

- Respond with brief encouraging remarks ("I see what you mean," "Tell me more," "That's interesting," "Oh really," etc.).

- Ask clarifying questions.

- Don't interrupt.

- Confirm your understanding by paraphrasing what you have heard.

Step 4

Create and Adhere to Guidelines on How to Address Conflicts.

Conflict is a natural outcome of change that will invariably arise throughout the project, conflict can be channeled to improve project processes or outcomes. When conflict does arise, it may help if partners understand the various ways of addressing conflict, in order to assess their own behavior and make decisions to support the work of the team.

Competition is a power-oriented mode in which one uses whatever seems appropriate to win one's own position. Power may be expressed through rank, argumentative expertise, or money. Competing may be used to defend a position that one believes is correct or simply to try to win. In this mode, one plays to win.

Accommodation is the opposite of competition and means yielding to another's point of view. In a group, accommodating individuals may succumb to pressure to make a decision by choosing not to insist on their point of view, and then disavow the group decision.

Avoidance is when a person refuses to engage in conflict. Avoiding may take the form of diplomatically sidestepping an issue, postponing an issue until a better time, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation.

Compromise entails working to find some expedient, mutually acceptable solution that fully, or at least partially, satisfies both parties. Compromise may mean splitting the difference; exchanging concessions; or seeking a quick, middle ground position. A problem with the compromise style is that some individuals may give in too easily and fail to seek a solution with significant gains to either party.

Collaboration means that a person asserts individual goals while also being concerned with the goals of others. Collaborating involves an attempt to work with others to find a solution that satisfies the concerns of all parties. Collaborating between two persons might take the form of:

- Exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights.

- Working together to resolve some condition that might have the two parties competing for power.

- Confronting and trying to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem.[8]

When the team finds itself in conflict, try implementing Tool 12: Tips for Conflict Management.

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[8] Thomas, K.W., and Kilman, R.H. *Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument*. Tuxedo Park, NY: XICOM, 1974.

Avoiding the Pitfalls

When establishing open and ongoing communication in a community policing collaboration, try to avoid the following pitfalls and consider implementing some of the suggested strategies if you have already encountered these challenges. Also, to help diagnose a struggling partnership, please refer to Section 1, Tool 1: Unsticking Stuck Groups/Reassessing the Collaboration, in particular items 21–24, to assess communication.

Pitfall:

A small subset of partners is vocal during planning meetings, while others are quiet, reserved, or aloof. Meeting and brainstorming norms require that all partners have equal opportunity to participate. However, if some members do not utilize effective communication and listening strategies, other members may feel belittled or unimportant, or simply may not be able to "get a word in."

Solutions:

Meeting ground rules must prohibit interruptions and criticism during brainstorming. The facilitator is responsible for enforcing these rules and redirecting unproductive conversations (see Section 3, Trust).

Various brainstorming techniques can be utilized to solicit feedback from participants (see Section 5, Tool 10: Brainstorming Activities, for a description of unstructured brainstorming, round robin, and the 4 people-3 ideas-5 minutes method).

At the beginning of the partnership, define acronyms or technical terms. As new members join the team, review these acronyms and terms so that everyone is speaking the same language.

Pitfall:

A partner complains that some partners seem to be "in the know" while s/he is "in the dark." While informal communication networks can be cost-effective and appropriate, informal communication alone cannot sustain the partnership. Some partners naturally will gravitate to one another on a personal level and may therefore inadvertently exclude other partners with less of a personal connection.

Solutions:

At the conclusion of each planning or brainstorming meeting, the recorder should summarize decisions and next steps and forward that information to all partners, whether or not they participated in the meeting.

Partner meetings should be scheduled in advance. As a follow-up, written or e-mail notices should be sent to all partners.

Create a Web site or electronic bulletin board and post pertinent information so that all partners may access it.

Pitfall:

Meetings often involve heated debates with little actual progress. Conflict that is not addressed directly may manifest itself during partner meetings. A partner may be so focused on getting his/her way, making his/her point, or even embarrassing another partner, that all partners are distracted. Conversely, conflict or miscommunication may stem from a lack of understanding of cultural issues among partners.

Solutions:

During the visioning meeting, the facilitator must help the team establish ground rules (see Section 3, Tool 3: Developing Team Norms). At each subsequent meeting, these rules should be visibly posted. The facilitator should refer to these rules at the beginning of the meeting and at points during the discussion to help ensure that they are observed. If an individual member repeatedly violates these rules, it is appropriate for the team leader to speak with him/her privately.

At the visioning meeting, it is important for core partners to acknowledge that change often is difficult to accept and may produce conflict. The team should be provided with basic communication tips, as well as tips for conflict management (see Section 7, Tool 12).

Issues of culture and diversity can begin to be addressed by discussing cross-cultural similarities and differences and by focusing on the group's common vision. Partners must be sensitive to and respect each other as they work together to achieve the common vision. Over time, mutually respectful behavior may grow into a better understanding and valuing of cultural differences.

The team leader should review Tips for Conducting Effective Meetings and Tips on How to Save a Meeting in Section 5, Expertise. The team leader must communicate clear goals for the meeting and distribute an agenda that reflects these goals. If the team has a clear agenda, the facilitator has a tool to help keep the meeting on track.

Pitfall:

The general public or those outside the partnership are skeptical of the collaboration and what it is trying to accomplish. It is not unusual that when people do not have complete information, they will try to fill knowledge gaps with their own presumptions or creative reasoning.

Solutions:

When the partnership is forming and invitations to members are being developed, emphasize that invitees are welcome to include others. Clearly state the purpose of the collaboration in the initial invitation and in all other subsequent correspondence (see Section 4, Tool 5: Sample Invitation to a Meeting to Develop a Shared Vision).

When the collaboration reaches a milestone, celebrate this achievement by letting others know about it (e.g., announce the event on the school loudspeakers, in the community newspaper, or at community meetings).

Address skepticism with an information campaign. Do not avoid questions or criticism. Instead, use informational materials or presentations or even informal conversations to tactfully correct misunderstandings with facts.

Tools to Plan and Chart Your Progress

Tool 12

Tips for Conflict Management [9]

- Begin negotiating with the points of agreement instead of the points of disagreement.

- Try to make choices available to the parties involved.

- Be respectful and distinguish between guessing what a particular behavior means and the behavior itself.

- Discriminate about when and how control is to be exercised. A low level of trust is usually generated when people always try to exercise power. Conflicts will likely emerge when trust is low.

- Take responsibility for seeing each viewpoint and role in a conflict. If there is conflict, more than one person has a role in creating and supporting that conflict, even if that role is withdrawal.

- State the goals of the conflict resolution in terms that are clear, specific, and achievable.

- Deal with both the content of the conflict and the relationship goals. Remember that the goal in most conflict resolution is twofold—to reach agreement and to enhance the relationship for future communication. Both are equally important.

- Try to avoid polarizing into separate groups or positions too early in the negotiations.

- Avoid reaching easy agreement of goals by premature voting, giving in too easily, or using chance measure (e.g., flipping a coin) when the issue demands more serious negotiation.

- Avoid speaking in terms of winning and losing. Talk in terms of what is best for the common good (or common vision).

- Sometimes participants in a conflict are too close to the situation to suggest more productive approaches. Know when to suggest or accept outside assistance.

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[9] Adapted from: Wilmot, W.W., and Hacker J.L., *Interpersonal Conflict*, 6th ed. New York, NY:McGraw-Hill, 2000.

Learn More About It

Negotiating Strategies

Fisher, R., Patton, B., and Ury, W. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In.* New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1992.

> This resource focuses on creating a "win-win" situation in the negotiation process. Written by two experts in negotiation strategies from Harvard University, this publication is relevant at the personal as well as professional levels. Available for purchase at: www.amazon.com.

Ury, W. *Getting Past No: Negotiating Your Way from Confrontation to Cooperation*. New York, NY: Bantam, 1993.

> This resource discusses a five-step strategy for dealing with difficult people. It provides readers with useful information and advice on issues such as keeping calm under pressure, dealing with underhanded tactics, finding mutually agreeable options, and standing up for oneself without provoking opposition. Available for purchase at: www.amazon.com.

Volkema, R. *The Negotiation Toolkit: How to Get Exactly What You Want in Any Business or Personal Situation*. New York, NY: AMACOM Books, American Management Association, 1999.

> This is a comprehensive and practical guide to negotiating in personal and professional situations. It discusses the "golden rule" of negotiation, the three fundamental questions of negotiation, when not to negotiate, and the eight behaviors of star negotiators. Available for purchase at: www.amazon.com.